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Testimony of Kevin Verbese, Director of the Suffolk Cooperative Library System, for the Long Island Region Public Hearing of the New NY Education Reform Commission

My name is Kevin Verbese and I am the Director of the Suffolk Cooperative Library System, on Long Island, and I also serve as both the President of the New York Public Library System Directors Organization and the Chairman of the New York Library Association’s Legislative Committee.

I want to thank the New NY Education Reform Commission for taking the time to come to Long Island to meet with us to discuss ways to improve education around our region and our State. There is perhaps no Statewide issue that confronts us today which touches so many of our citizens and impacts us more than those concerning education. I am hopeful that the conversations which you have today and the ones which you have had all around New York may lead us towards developing and implementing specific steps and strategies that will lead to meaningful reforms and improvements to our public education system.

You have come to us today asking for “actionable solutions to improve New York’s public education system in order to better meet the needs of its students while also respecting the taxpayer.”

I offer the following two basic suggestions for your consideration:

- 1) Recognize that the educational system and fabric of New York State reaches beyond K-12 education.

No one denies or questions the central role and value of providing a fundamentally sound primary and secondary education for all of our citizens. However, it is also important that our State Government recognize – and act – with the understanding that other critical education services - like public libraries – exist and are an important element of overall student success, development, and achievement.

Your Commission is charged with examining factors that raise student achievement including parental involvement, the availability of technology and its positive impact on college and career readiness, and the impact of access to high quality early childhood programs. Each of those areas is central to the mission and goals of all public libraries.

Libraries are community resources that promote a love of reading and offer a multitude of opportunities for lifelong learning. Numerous studies have shown that parents and caregivers who read regularly are much more likely to raise successful students. The American Library Association and libraries across New York State have developed and offer a number of valuable early childhood programs that encourage parents to positively engage in their child's educational preparedness from birth on.

Some of those programs include;

Books for Babies - a national literacy program that acquaints parents of newborns with the important role they play in the development of their children.

Born to Read, It's Never Too Early to Start! - an initiative that helps expectant and new parents become aware that reading to a baby from birth on is critical to every baby's growth and well being.

Every Child Ready to Read - a series of turnkey parent and caregiver workshops that provide vital tools to help prepare parents for their critical role as their child's first teacher.

These types of sessions – designed specifically for parents and caregivers - compliment regular library programming for children and students like pre-school storytimes, Mommy and Me sessions, and a multitude of others educational opportunities that help ensure New York's children come to school ready to read and learn. In fact in 2010 New York's public libraries held more than two million programs geared specifically for children and students.

Public libraries also serve as a “university of digital literacy” for many New Yorkers. While access to computers, broadband, and technology instruction is taken as a given in many New York households it is still a distant dream in too many others.

The hardware, software, bandwidth, and training classes that libraries provide are lifelines to many New Yorkers without the means to purchase these technologies. In 2010 there were 23,770,940 public usage sessions logged at the 16,669 public access computers available in New York's public libraries. The critical infrastructure which allows this access is crumbling in many places and its greatest impact often falls on those who most need the service.

2) Make New York State Government more “cooperation friendly.”

One of the best ways, for any organization, to reduce costs and improve effectiveness is to partner with other organizations on shared services. Public libraries have a long and comprehensive history of working together, through regional library systems, to provide shared services and cooperative programs. It is in the “DNA” of libraries to share and lend with both individuals and with communities.

In Suffolk County alone this year (2012) Suffolk Cooperative Library System member libraries are working together to purchase shared services in excess of \$4,350,000. These services include online information databases available to all County residents, an online homework assistance service available to all County students, downloadable eBooks available to all County residents, an online skills building and employment assistance resource available to all County

residents, a telecommunications network used by libraries to connect to shared services, a shared circulation control system that tracks the holdings and collections of Suffolk's libraries, as well as numerous shared purchasing arrangements for things like office supplies, furniture, computers and other technologies. Libraries in Suffolk County are saving well in excess of \$1,000,000 this year by working cooperatively to purchase these services.

Unfortunately opportunities to expand this regional cooperation -- and cost savings -- to a Statewide level are near non-existent. The reasons for this lack of cost savings opportunities are complex and varied. This Commission should review the mechanisms and processes that are used by the State Education Department, the Office of General Services, and all State agencies that could facilitate these types of cooperative arrangements and recommend any needed changes to rules and regulations that are currently preventing these types of arrangements from happening.

If the Suffolk Cooperative Library System can provide this many opportunities for our members to enhance their service programs and save taxpayer money working in one part of the State then clearly the cost savings and enhanced services available through similar Statewide initiatives would be exponentially higher.

I again would like to thank the Commission for undertaking this important task and for offering me the chance to participate in your fact gathering process. I would urge you to carefully consider the recommendations and idea that you hear and I look forward to reading your final report and to the important improvements that may, someday, come from it.